

"The Nazareth Beachhead"

Luke 1:26-55

December 21, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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A pastor addressed children near Christmas. "Who is the mother of Jesus?" she asked. Returned the chorus of tiny voices, "Mary!" "That's right!" said the pastor. "And who is the father of Jesus?" There was a long pause with a bit of fidgeting. Then, a young man announced boldly, "It's Virg." After a pregnant silence he said, "You know, 'Virg an' Mary.'"

This silliness of this joke pales in comparison to the silliness of the script that is the Christmas message. Today's Gospel is but the beginning of an absolutely preposterous script of how God invades our world.

I usually resist using military images in relation to Christian faith. The history of Christianity has too many acts of violence perpetuated in the name of faith. The current war on terror, now coming near to its fourteenth year since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, brings home daily the frightful cost of war and conflict, whether the cause be ignoble or noble.

Yet I have titled this message "The Nazareth Beachhead" because what St. Luke describes is nothing less than the initial engagement in the divine invasion of the world.

Ironically, God invades a world that has always belonged to God. But somewhere, somehow, we rejected God. Now, in today's encounter in Nazareth between the angel Gabriel and Mary, God is determined to take back the world. That is the language of amphibious invasions, which appear from the mists beyond the sea to take back what once belonged to the invaders.

Amphibious invasions are a part of American military history for at least 150 years, since the 54th Massachusetts (the first African-American unit in the American Civil War, made famous in

the movie "Glory!"), made its unsuccessful 1863 attempt to capture Battery Wagner outside Charleston, South Carolina. Used episodically in the 19th century, amphibious invasions were used—usually with disastrous results—in World War I but refined in the Second World War. The war in the Pacific Theatre was nearly entirely amphibious, with the necessary corollaries of air and sea power. In Europe, the ill-fated 1942 amphibious assault in Dieppe, France was the proving ground for successful operations in 1943 at Anzio in Italy and in 1944 in "Operation Overlord," "D-Day," in Normandy, France. In 1951 General Douglas MacArthur turned the tide in Korea with the invasion at Inchon. Of course, other countries at other times have used amphibious assault as a strategy.

But the Gospel story is an amphibious invasion of a different kind. Think for a moment about the finest of military equipment, strategy, troop strength and training. Think "101st Airborne" and "82nd Airborne" and "Tenth Mountain Division" and "The United States Marines." Now think, "God." How much more can God marshal in strength and power: God who created the heavens and brought form to the void of earth and raised the Rocky Mountains?

Yet God begins the invasion of the world through...a woman! A single woman, in both meanings of that phrase: one lone woman, and a woman unmarried. Never mind that researchers have found something that will do the work of five men: one woman! What kind of battle plan is this against the human hate and evil which prompts the necessity for the invasion in the first place? What is God thinking? It is almost as ridiculous as saying that Jesus' parents are "Virg an' Mary."

Yet that is how it goes. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her that she will be nothing less than the mother of the savior of the world!

I once led an Advent Bible study about Mary at a church that also used the lectionary readings. Why, one participant wondered, were the verses omitted from today's appointed lectionary reading that

describe the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth? Since they set up Mary's song, the Magnificat, (vss. 46-55), it seemed an odd omission. Good point! So we heard the whole passage today.

I asked "*How would you have responded, if you were Mary?*" As I jotted notes on their responses, one asked if I was writing my sermon. I was! Among their comments:

Mary might have felt embarrassed or ashamed since Gabriel promised a baby but she was not yet married.

Mary might be worried that her fiancé would not understand.

Mary might be afraid. After all, how many of us meet angels?

"I'm not sure I'd respond the same," said one.

Mary might be anxious about an uncertain future, yet God persuaded her.

She said the same thing as the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament, when he heard the voice of God: 'Here I am.'"

To this latter point, we sometimes think of Mary's response as weak submission. The poet Denise Levertov counters: "*We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.*"* Indeed, Mary does not submissively surrender; she steps forward to enlist in God's invasion of the world. As wonderful as the Beatle's song "Let It Be" is, what Mary says is: "*Let it be with me according to your word.*" She courageously gives herself to the story that will be told by God's word, God's promise. She consents to join her story with the greatest story ever told. We see why artists have portrayed Mary as a student of God's word. To those who resist the unreasonableness of it all, the poet Madeline L'Engle enjoins:

*This is the irrational season when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason, there'd have been no room for the child.*

**Annunciation,* "The Stream and the Sapphire" (New York: New Directions, p.59)

It is this irrational hope that causes Mary to exult "*My soul magnifies the Lord*" and "*God's mercy is on those who fear him*" and "*God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.*" We might be justified in asking "When?" The morning news showed the powerful on their thrones and the hungry lining up at soup kitchens.

Yet Mary sings like this because she isn't waiting for the last inning or the final returns. She feels the first installment of God's promise alive in her own flesh. She knows the invasion is beginning, an invasion borne of God's love for the world God created and will now move all heaven and earth to save from sin, sickness and despair.

How can one young girl make such a difference? After all, most scholars agree, based on the culture of the time, Mary was likely a teenager when she was betrothed to Joseph and Gabriel showed up. One of our women members gave me permission to tell of the time, years ago, when she was unemployed for over nine months. When she finally got a job, she got it this way: her employer happened to have a mother, Rosalie, who was also an employer. And Rosalie just happened to employ our member's daughter. Said Rosalie to her daughter, "*If her mother is half the worker her daughter is, hire her now!*" Said our member to me of her daughter: "*The day your career depends on your 16-year-old's work ethic is a scary day.*" Mary, the teenager, steps up to face fear with the love of God in her heart and in her child.

Many have responded in the weeks before today. We have supported the children of Boys' and Girls' Village with individual gifts. We have supported both the United Methodist Women and the Methodist Youth Fellowship in their fund-raisers for missions. We have supported our children as they told the ancient yet ever-new story of Jesus birth. We have sung to our home-bound members and friends. Our Confirmation class sent Christmas cards to many of the same folks.

God's invasion of love has begun. Mary stepped up and others will, too. The only question that remains is "*Will we be among them?*"